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Remarks on the Doctrine of the Influence
of the Holy Spirit . 1817

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REMARKS
ON
THE DOCTRINE
OF THE
Influence
OF
THE HOLY SPIRIT.



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THE observations contained in the following pages are to be met with in a pamphlet lately published, entitled "The Christian Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, exhibited from the Scriptures, with introductory remarks;" sold by W. Phillips, and Darton and Harvey, London; also by W. Alexander, York. The extracts in the compilation consist of nearly all the material passages in the New Testament, wherein mention is made of the Spirit; either doctrinally or incidentally; without selection further than to avoid unnecessary repetition, and in the order in which they occur. The introductory remarks have been thought so valuable, as to merit a second publication in this form, with the intention that they should thus be more widely circulated. It will afford pleasure to the publishers, if the reading of these arguments should induce a desire to examine the work from which they are extracted.

M

REMARKS, &c.

THE influence of the Spirit of Truth on the mind, has been maintained by the most eminent and pious persons in all ages, and to it they have attributed their stability and advancement in true religion. This is strong presumptive evidence that it is consistent with the doctrine contained in the Scriptures, but more especially in the New Testament; and ought to render us doubly careful, that we do not reject it without due examination. Notwithstanding, there is a class of persons professing christianity, who consider this gift to have been shed only on the primitive believers, and that any belief in its existence in the present day, is irrational and enthusiastic.

On viewing the objections of those who profess to deny the influence of the Spirit, the following considerations present themselves:—That the effusion of the Holy Spirit was announced by the Prophets who foretold the coming of our Lord, and promulgated by his precursor, John,* as a distinguishing circumstance attending the introduction of the gospel; which shews it to have been an *integral* part of that dispensation, and that

* Matt. iii. 1, 12. Mark, i. 1-8. John, i. 29-33.

it must therefore continue till the dispensation is abrogated : which cannot in common reason be denied.

That we are supported in this opinion, by a reference to the intention for which this gift was dispensed to mankind ; which, it appears by scripture testimony, was for the purpose of assisting man in the work of regeneration ;* and which assistance must be equally necessary now, as his weakness and liability to sin and transgression, remain unchanged.

That, though the effusion of the Spirit upon many of the primitive believers, was attended with extraordinary gifts, to forward the purposes of the Divine will in the establishment of the Gospel, yet it was not universally so ; but appeared in the great mass of the early believers, in the same way as it is believed to appear in the present day : not being attended with extraordinary gifts, but producing the effects of righteousness.

That the fruits of the Spirit cannot be different from or contradictory to what is asserted in the Scriptures ; and therefore a belief in its influence on the mind, cannot be enthusiastic or irrational, though it may be misunderstood and abused.

A few brief observations on these points may be useful to such readers, as have not been accustomed to consider this subject with reference to the objections stated.

It is undoubtedly the object of true religion to purify the heart and conduct, so as to render us worthy of the divine acceptance, and the enjoyment of a state of bliss hereafter ; or in other words, of an admission into the kingdom of heaven ; but in order to this, we must in this life

* John iii. 1-8.

have undergone that change of our nature, which will in some degree assimilate us to the divine purity; the necessity of which is fully stated in the Scriptures. In the emphatic language of our Saviour, it is called being born again; and the same purpose is variously named in different parts of the New Testament*. This change, conscious as we must be of sin and imperfection, must be allowed to be fully consistent with our ideas of what is reasonable and correct; but when it assumes the shape of a divine revelation, we are not permitted to doubt of its *necessity*. The sayings of our Lord, as well as the writings of his Apostles, fully confirm it. In that conversation which he had with Nicodemus, memorable for its deep instruction in religious truth, this change is ascribed to the operation of the Spirit; and, it must be effected by the same means to the end of time; our natural state being the same it has always been.

His discourse with the woman of Samaria† points out a living principle, to be given by him, which was to produce eternal life to its possessor: and with this there is a remarkable coincidence, in his declaration on the last great day of the Feast, which the Evangelist expressly declares to allude to the gift of the Spirit, which was to be shed after he was glorified.‡ The parable of the Man§ and his Friend, is equally clear as to the Divine intention in this respect, and that we ought, moreover, earnestly to desire it. And it may be here asked, as we are by nature so prone to sin, how are we to root out our evil propensities, but by some assistance *different* in its nature and purpose? What but this must enable us to

* Ephes. iv. 15-30. v. 8-21.

† John, vii. 37-39.

‡ John, iv. 5-26.

§ Luke, xi. 9-13.

take up the daily cross to our natural inclinations? to deny ourselves the pleasures of sense, or the allurements of interest, when they are inconsistent with purity? The deficient practice of all mankind, while they have not their dependence on Divine aid, is a clear answer to these questions; for however fair the outward conduct may appear, if the source of action—the heart, be not purified, which it can only be through the operation of Divine power, it only wants the storms of temptation to overthrow the fabric: and, as the nature of sin is the same in all, though its modifications may be various, so we are all equally in need of this assistance—the learned with the ignorant—the philosopher with the peasant.

Persons possessed of good natural dispositions, and placed in situations favourable to regular conduct, may have a sort of habitual morality, which leaves us nothing to accuse them of; but let them not suppose themselves secure on that account. That virtue which is not the effect of principle is of very uncertain duration, and we are *all* required to *improve* our talents and advantages. We ought also to remember, that Christianity goes upon the necessity of a *change* of our nature and affections, as the only sure means of producing conduct, consistent with the purity of its precepts, under all circumstances; even where our private interests and inclinations may be opposed to it. The work of religion, if properly undertaken, is sure in its end, but it is of gradual, and sometimes, from the prevalence of our lusts, of painful operation; and if our minds are sufficiently awakened to the subject, none will find time for idleness or self-security.

* In those sublime and instructive conversations

which our Saviour had with his disciples, a short time previous to his suffering, as well as in that ever-memorable prayer he offered up for them, he has shown that the great purpose of his mission was to reveal the way of Truth, and to establish a spiritual communion and communication with himself and the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for our help and direction in the way of righteousness. The necessity of *keeping up* this communication, in order to the production of Fruit, is beautifully, and incontrovertibly set forth, in the parable of the Vine and the Branches. This Spirit, he also declared, was to lead into all truth, and to reprove *the world* of sin, of righteousness and of judgment; thus comprehending every thing that can relate to salvation, or the knowledge of God. These declarations are in themselves decisive, and as they are elucidated by the Apostles, they become further confirmed. The manner in which they have reasoned on the operations of the Spirit, and declared its effects, clearly show, that to it was attributed their progress in the Christian life. For though some had extraordinary gifts for the service of the Church, as appears by 1 Cor. chap. xii. yet these being for specific purposes, could not be expected to be possessed by all. But the Apostle says, "*a manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.*" This shows its *general* intention with respect to mankind at large. And the extraordinary gifts he enumerates, had ultimately the same tendency, by an unusual display of Divine power, to strike conviction on the mind of the most unenlightened, as well as to remove the opposition and prejudices of the Jews, who had become so much attached to the ritual of the law, that it was with difficulty they would admit the evidences

of a religion, so pure and spiritual as Christianity.

It is remarkable, in the chapter just named, as well as in that which immediately follows, how earnestly the Apostle recommends them to covet the *best* gifts, in contradistinction to those which were extraordinary; and concludes by showing what he calls "a more excellent way," pointing out the possession of Charity, as comprehending the substance of Christianity, to be a transcendent object of attainment; without which, all other qualifications, how extraordinary soever, are of no value: and in continuation, in the next chapter, the xivth he shows, by a course of strong and clear reasoning, the superiority of the gift of prophecy, or speaking to edification, exhortation, and comfort, over that of speaking with tongues; which further confirms the opinion, that the direct and permanent object of spiritual gifts, was the establishment of righteousness. It is therefore quite consistent with sound reason to conclude, that after Christianity was firmly established, the miraculous gifts would be withdrawn; an opinion, which is without detriment to the continuation of those gifts, which remain to be necessary in the constitution of a Christian church. Hence gospel ministry, as well as other qualifications for the spiritual service of the church, must continue to be derived from the same source; and is therefore not dependent on human learning or attainments, though our usefulness may be increased by the possession of them. Nor let any one suppose, that this opinion leads to enthusiasm, or self-exaltation. Spiritual gifts are not at our command, and no man receives them, who is not promoting the work of redemption in his own mind; and as every step he takes in advance, must be preceded

and followed by a perception of his own imperfection and unworthiness, it must have a constant tendency to produce *humility*, meekness, and gentleness: and if these effects are not produced such a person is deceiving himself. A due degree of earnestness and fervency in our religious duties, is, however very proper; and must necessarily follow an advancement in the knowledge and love of God.

It appears, therefore, that those who ascribe pride or enthusiasm to a belief in this doctrine, have a mistaken view of it. Perhaps they have never examined the writings of the Evangelists and Apostles with sufficient attention; or have been misled by a strong attachment to pre-conceived opinions, which may have been inculcated in early youth.

It is not unusual for such persons to ask for definitions and explanations on this subject, which from its nature cannot be given. We may be very sure of a thing which we feel, though we may fail in defining that feeling to the satisfaction of another, who is not inclined to admit it. Our own experience teaches us, how slowly we admit an outward fact, when the mind is fore-closed against it; much more things of a less tangible nature. To such persons it may be observed, that those impressions which are not received into the mind, *through the medium of the outward senses*, are not in their nature capable of explanation, except by their effects; in the same way, as many of our common feelings can only be explained, by a reference to similar feelings in others. We feel the influence of the Spirit of Truth, reproving us for the evil of our thoughts and conduct, and constraining us to aspire after greater purity of life and manners;

and humbling us under a sense of our weakness and imperfections; and having this feeling, we know that it exists, although the exact way of its operation may be difficult to define, to those who are indisposed to acknowledge the same influence. We also find it conformable to those descriptions of its nature and effects, which we meet with in the New Testament. Our Saviour's words to Nicodemus seem to confirm these remarks:—"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." Those therefore, who would deprive Christianity of its spiritual character, would deprive it of what is its distinguishing and superior recommendation. For, from this cause alone can arise that uniform and exemplary morality, which is the possession only of inward worth, and of a mind purified on Christian principles. *Any person who will attentively read the New Testament, must be convinced, if plain evidence will do it, that the religion taught by Christ is spiritual in its nature, and must therefore have a spiritual *ministration*.† It cannot be supposed, when we consider those pathetic illustrations of the paternal regard of our Creator, which have been given by Christ in his discourses, that our Almighty parent would require from us, a degree of purity which he would not enable us to attain. Indeed, there is no adequate reason, unless the fault be on our part, why the effusion of the Holy Spirit should be attended with less power now, miraculous gifts apart, than it was in the days of the primitive Christians. Though all men have sufficient illumination to guide their

* Romans, viii. 1-17. 1 Cor. ii. 9-16. Galat. v. 16-26.

† Colos. i. 21-29.

steps in the pursuit of truth, yet if they are not sincerely* disposed to follow it, they must be deficient in that degree of faith which is necessary to the full influence of the Spirit. It is easy for a man to say he is a Christian, being so by profession; but amongst the primitive believers, no man would assume the name, who was not so in heart; since he had a test of his sincerity always ready, in the scorn of unconverted friends, and the abuse of a prejudiced and hard-hearted people. Nothing therefore but a conviction of the truth of Christianity, and the consequent obligation to obey its precepts, could induce him to embrace a profession, which carried with it so many circumstances mortifying to human nature. The same sincerity of conversion would in the present day produce the same effects, in the assistance and communion of the Holy Spirit, in that degree which our particular situation might require, in the sight of divine wisdom. I would ask any person of sound understanding, if it would seem consistent with the divine intention, to introduce a gift attended with so many extraordinary circumstances, and sanctioned by the descent of the Son of God, if it were intended to be withdrawn with the first believers, who form so small a part of his rational creation? Such an opinion seems irreconcilable with the *undiminished* power, the wisdom, the justice, and the beneficence of God. But on this, as well as every other question connected with our well-being, the sacred volume is sufficiently clear to common understandings, and a disbelief in any of the fundamental principles of Christianity, if examined into, would be found

* The evidence of sincerity is obedience to the divine law, so far as we know it. See James ii. 14 to 17.

frequently to arise from a disinclination to submit to those salutary privations which it requires ; but which are at the same time the only certain evidence of our faith and love to God. Let us not therefore deceive ourselves : if our salvation be wrought out, it can only be by those means which he has appointed. And if it should appear by the scriptures, that it must be effected through the influence and assistance of the Spirit, it is in vain for us to seek out another way. Sincerity and true devotedness are only wanting on our part, to be effectual through the divine promises, for the production of all the beneficial consequences, so strikingly expressed in various parts of the scripture. This divine instructor would wound us only to heal, and as we yielded to its reproofs, would often draw our minds into retirement and prayer for the pardon of our transgressions, and for assistance more fully to obey the divine will ; and finally establish that communion between the soul of man and his God, which our Saviour largely testified of,* and which, whether in public assemblies, or in private retirement, must be the medium of divine communication and worship : and, if continued in, we should in our spiritual progress undoubtedly experience the truth of the prophetic declaration “ I will make “ darkness light before them ; and crooked “ things straight ; these things will I do unto them, “ and not forsake them.”†

* John xiv. xv. xvi. Ephes. ii. 16-22.

† Isa. xlii. 16.



